

Chapter 1

Thea Paris felt as if she were trapped inside a giant cocktail shaker. Up, down, side to side—the turbulence delivered a wallop to the 737. A sheen of sweat dampened her forehead, her vision was blurred, and the world felt slightly off-kilter. Was her blood sugar out of whack? A quick glance at the app on her phone: 110. All under control. Her nerves, not so much. Modern airliners were resilient enough to ride out severe turbulence without coming apart or falling out of the sky, but that knowledge didn't help her feel any better.

She just hated flying.

Maybe it was the lack of control that drove her crazy? Rif Asker—her colleague and longtime friend—was an ace pilot, and he gently chided her about how she was able to remain calm under enormous duress in her job, while the sound of jet engines firing up rattled her to the core. Well, Rif wasn't there today, and air travel was an essential part of being a crisis response consultant, the industry term for a kidnap negotiator.

Most of the time, she could distract herself by focusing on her current case, but it didn't always work. She gritted her teeth and

tried to present a brave front to the two boys beside her, both first-time fliers. The African charity her late brother, Nikos, had founded to help recovering child soldiers had started an adoption program, and these two brothers were headed to their new home in London with the Waverton family. Jabari Kuria was twelve, Ayan, nine. After witnessing their parents' beheadings by Boko Haram, they had been forced to invade neighboring villages to abduct other children, soldiers in a war they didn't understand.

The plane dropped suddenly, leaving them weightless for what felt like an endless moment. Then their butts slammed back into their seats as the metal bird hit an updraft. Thea's stomach protested. If the seat-belt light hadn't been on, she'd have been tempted to grab an Ativan from her SINK (survival insurance nightmare kit) in the overhead compartment. The tote contained everything *but* the kitchen sink, including a steel compass, a flashlight, a booster, first-aid supplies, her diabetes medications, and other potentially useful items that, if detected, would cause an airport security officer to escort her to a windowless room for further questioning. As a freedom broker, she traveled undercover to global hot spots and never knew what might be needed. The SINK came with her everywhere.

Jabari smiled and poked her arm. "This is more fun than riding an ostrich."

Only a kid could think of this shaken-not-stirred flight as a good time. Her fingers strangled the armrests. She checked the boys' seat belts for the fourth time. "It sure is." She forced a smile. "And every flight is different. Sometimes there's no shaking at all."

She shouldn't complain about the rocky skies. Getting the boys to their adoptive home was what counted. They'd missed their connection in Nairobi, but with Rif's help, they had been able to secure three seats on a chartered Boeing Business Jet, flying to London in style. The Wavertons and Papa planned to pick them up at Heathrow, bringing Aegis, the Paris family dog, to meet the boys and help put them at ease. The last time they'd been together, Thea and her father had argued about Nikos's

memorial; she'd wanted to place it next to her mother's tomb at their house in Martha's Vineyard, but Papa had refused. Yet more fallout from her brother's death. Maybe when she reached London, the two of them could find some time to work on healing their fractured relationship.

Ayan was curled up in his window seat, pointing outside. "Why aren't the wings flapping?"

"It's not a bird, silly. It's a plane, a jet." Jabari enjoyed lord-ing his superior knowledge over his little brother, but if anyone tried to bully Ayan, Jabari would be the first to defend him. Knowing the hell they'd gone through, she hoped this would be a fresh start, a chance to reclaim their childhoods. The boys' situation struck a very personal chord with her, as Nikos had also been kidnapped by an African warlord at twelve and forced to do unspeakable things. He'd never fully recovered from the trauma. And the orphanage was his legacy—now their legacy, as she'd assumed responsibility for the charity with Nikos gone.

Ayan's index finger hammered at the TV screen in the seat back in front of him. "Look, Jabari, it's a story about a lion."

A smile managed to surface through her unease. *The Lion King* was one of the in-flight movies.

"What if I want to watch something else?" Jabari's lower lip jutted forward.

"Then you can play another movie on your own screen. Pick whatever you like. We're very lucky—we can choose anything."

Thea scanned the plane, cataloging the other passengers, an occupational reflex. A stunning middle-aged Asian woman dressed in black, an old man wearing a fedora, a fair-haired bean-pole with wire-rimmed glasses and a bow tie who was clutching his computer bag, a slickster dressed in Versace, a strapping guy with a handlebar mustache, a dandy wearing seersucker pants and a panama hat. She couldn't fight an unsettled mood that had nothing to do with the turbulence.

The plane shook again, rattling the overhead bins. An older, barrel-chested gentleman seated near the emergency exit turned and looked in her direction. Sweat drenched his forehead, and he kept crossing and uncrossing his legs. Maybe he felt nervous or nauseated from the turbulence but couldn't use the lavatory because the seat-belt lights were on.

She could relate.

"Do they have many animals in London?" Jabari asked.

"You'll see some dogs and cats and even horses, but the UK is quite different from Africa." She guessed the London Zoo could either be their favorite outing or a thoroughly depressing spectacle. The boys would definitely experience culture shock in London, but they were smart and capable, and the family adopting them would provide opportunities they never would have had at the orphanage.

Another sudden drop.

"Wheee!" Ayan laughed and raised his slender arms in the air.

She swore under her breath, not wanting to challenge the boys' opinion that this aeronautical roller-coaster ride was brilliant fun. Although it felt as if they'd plummeted three thousand feet in two seconds, the plane's altitude had probably only dropped ten or twenty feet. But the turbulence caused the 737 to pitch and roll like a rowboat in a typhoon.

She'd learned everything she could about planes and safety, hoping the knowledge would ease her anxiety. It didn't.

She checked her blood sugar levels again. A little low. She hoped the pummeling would stop soon, so the flight attendants could offer food and beverage service. She needed to eat, and the two boys would gobble any food the second it appeared—a habit learned during their captivity and, no doubt, reinforced at the orphanage.

A few minutes later, the turbulence settled a touch. Had they reached calmer skies, or was it like an earthquake, where aftershocks came rippling in just when you thought it was safe?

Movement at the front of the plane caught her attention. The cockpit door opened, and the copilot stepped out into the cabin. Didn't the seat-belt sign apply to him? Two pilots on the flight deck were better than one, especially in these conditions.

After a quick word with a flight attendant, the copilot slipped into the forward bathroom. Was he in desperate need of relief, ill, or what?

Thea's gaze locked on the lavatory door, waiting for him to reemerge.

One thousand, two thousand, three thousand . . .

A solid thump startled her. The heavyset older man who'd been sweating a couple of rows ahead had slumped over the edge of his seat and was hanging into the aisle. She waited a couple of seconds for him to move.

He didn't.

She held out her little finger to Jabari and Ayan. "Stay here, buckled up. Pinky swear." She'd taught them this ritual during one of her visits to the orphanage.

The plane jolted to the left and dipped.

The boys entwined their pinkies with hers.

"Thanks, guys." She released her seat belt and stood. Bracing herself on the overhead compartments, she clambered forward to where the man had collapsed in his seat. One of the flight attendants met her there.

She placed two fingers on the stocky man's neck. "No pulse."

The plane started shaking again.

The attendant held his wrist. "I'm not getting anything either."

Several passengers leaned forward, trying to get a better look. She snapped open the man's seat belt, looped her arms underneath his shoulders, and pulled him out of the seat. The plane dropped abruptly, and she almost lost her hold on him. She stabilized her footing, yanked him into the aisle, and lowered him to the floor. Not easy. The man was built like a fully loaded washing machine.

The flight attendant knelt beside her, brushing his red hair off his forehead. His name tag read BERNARD.

“You a doctor?” he asked.

“More like a combat medic.” Gunshots, puncture wounds, and other side effects of extreme violence were her specialty. Given the man’s age, pallor, and physical condition, her first thought was that he’d suffered a heart attack. He needed oxygen. Four to five minutes without it, and he’d be brain dead. “Defibrillator,” Thea said.

Bernard hurried off to get it.

She placed the heel of her left hand on the center of his chest, resting her right hand directly on top. Linking her fingers together, she kept her elbows straight and pushed down hard. Queen’s “Another One Bites the Dust” ran through her head. During training, they’d played the familiar tune over and over, as it had one hundred beats per minute, the ideal rhythm for compressions. She delivered a quick thirty thrusts to keep his circulation going.

She reached under his neck to ease open his airway and listened for any sign of breathing. He smelled strongly of onions, but there was no hint of air movement from his lungs. Another bout of turbulence thrust her against the nearby seats. She steadied herself, pinched his nostrils shut while pulling his head slightly back, and puffed a breath into the man’s mouth, initiating artificial respiration. His chest rose. *Okay, no obstruction.* She gave him another big lungful, then completed thirty more compressions.

Bernard returned with the defibrillator, the copilot at his heels. “Keep going while I get it ready.”

“Not looking good?” the copilot asked, concern in his eyes.

“I’d recommend an emergency landing.”

“Roger.” He sped toward the cockpit.

After she’d finished five rounds of thirty compressions and two breaths, sweat dripped down her back. In the distance, someone was banging at the front of the cabin, but she couldn’t

worry about that now. She shot a quick glance at the boys. They were in their seats, as promised, but, like the rest of the passengers, they were craning their necks so they could see what she was doing. She gave Ayan and Jabari a reassuring smile. They certainly wouldn't forget their first flight.

Bernard had started the automated external defibrillator. He ripped the man's shirt open and applied the electrode pads to the upper right and lower left chest.

"Analyzing rhythm, clear," Bernard warned.

She moved aside, letting the AED complete its analysis.

"Shock advised. Remain clear."

"Got it."

Bernard pressed the shock button.

Waited.

The AED advised him to shock again.

And again.

Dammit. The man's heart wasn't responding. She started the compressions again, replaying the throbbing beats of "Another One Bites the Dust" in her mind.

Come on, Freddie, help me out here.

Bernard felt for a pulse. He shook his head.

She wouldn't give up.

Thea completed another round of compressions and looked up to see the copilot, who had returned from the front of the plane. "Are we landing somewhere soon?" she asked. "This man needs immediate medical intervention."

The copilot lowered his voice. "Bit of an issue. The pilot has locked the door and won't let me back in."